

# Teenage pregnancy prevention programs save tax dollars

Gary L. YATES – Oakland Tribune- September 1, 2006

OVER THE past decade, the teen birthrate in California dropped by more than 46 percent — the steepest decline of any state in the country.

In the East Bay, the trend is also heartening. According to a recent Public Health Institute report, "No Time for Complacency: Teen Births in California," the teen pregnancy rate in Oakland decreased by 50 percent between 1991 and 2004. The report singled out California Senate Districts 9 (Alameda and Contra Costa counties) and 10 (Alameda and Santa Clara counties) as "beacon districts," with teen birthrates lower than the state average and a decline in birthrates between 2001 and 2004 that surpasses the state average.

Experts attribute the overall decline in California's teen birthrates to state and private funding for teen pregnancy prevention programs, including reproductive health care services and comprehensive sex education, and also to the state's refusal to accept federal abstinence-only education funds. (These funds may be used only for programs that do not include "promotion (of) or instruction" about contraceptives.)

Moreover, community organizations across California are demonstrating that teen pregnancy can be prevented through efforts such as community organizing, building capacity of adolescent health service providers, and the establishment of peer-led teen clinics throughout the state. Thousands of adult youth-service providers have honed their skills in preventing teenage pregnancy through regional trainings, and young leaders in adolescent health promotion have been awarded scholarships to pursue health careers.

Since the early 1990s, California has taken the lead in allocating funds to research-based policies and programs for positive adolescent development and teen pregnancy prevention. This leadership spans the administrations of three governors — two Republicans and one Democrat.

Currently, \$120 million in annual state and private funding for pregnancy prevention saves taxpayers an estimated \$968 million in net costs — including welfare and medical assistance, costs for foster placement and incarceration of children, and lost tax revenue based on teen parents' lower incomes and consumption levels. The total net savings to society is estimated to be \$2.2 billion annually.

The reasons why teen pregnancy prevention has yielded an excellent return on investment are rooted in the health and social consequences of teen pregnancy. Teenage girls who become pregnant tend to drop out of school earlier and have

less stable employment than girls from similar backgrounds who postpone childbirth and face greater health risks than women in their 20s. Teenage fathers also tend to have lower educational levels and earnings over time than their peers.

On Sept. 13, the California Wellness Foundation will hold its annual teenage pregnancy prevention conference in Oakland. Among the key issues to be discussed is the need to respond to the increasing diversity of California's population. Outreach must be targeted to the needs of specific cultural and ethnic groups. More youth development programs must be established to provide teens with job and life-management skills — proven ways of motivating teens to delay parenting. Continued access to appropriate reproductive health care that is culturally sensitive and language-appropriate must also be assured.

Our most pressing item of business is to spread the word about the success of teen pregnancy prevention programs. The bottom line is that continued investment in teenage pregnancy prevention services by the state of California is vital to the health and welfare of generations of our children. Policymakers should continue to provide adequate funding for these services, recognizing that when teens are given medically accurate information and access to health care, they are more likely to make responsible choices.

Gary L. Yates is president and chief executive officer of The California Wellness Foundation, which has funded teenage pregnancy prevention programs since 1993.